Kokua Hawaii Oral History Project Interview with

Edyson Ching

Edyson Ching
Photo courtesy of Ching family

Edyson Quangchong Ching was a U.S. Army veteran of the Vietnam War who chose to side with Kalama Valley residents and their supporters in opposing their eviction. He was arrested in the valley along with 31 other people on May 11, 1971. Ching, a retired firefighter who now lives on the East Coast, was interviewed by Gary T. Kubota by telephone on February 25, 2017.

GK: Good morning, Edyson. When and where were you born?

EC: I was born in 1947 in Honolulu.

GK: Okay, who were your parents?

EC: My father was Edward Quangchong Ching. My mother was Betty Quanlong Chi. So, it's Ching versus the Chi. That's a powerful Chinese name, Ching and Chi. (Chuckles)

GK: Are you part Hawaiian too?

EC: Yeah. My mother side of the family was Chinese, Hawaiian, and English. And my dad was basically pure Chinese.

GK: Where did you go to high school?

EC: I graduated from Saint Louis High School in 1965.

GK: Where were you raised? What area?

EC: I was raised in Kapahulu, Waikiki, and the Kaimuki area. My stomping grounds were the Waikiki wall, the Honolulu Zoo and Kapiolani Park. I lived in the back of Kaimuki High School in the area of Date Street and Winam Avenue near the Ala Wai Canal.

GK: Did your parents own the land over there?

EC: We owned a small house and land over there. They bought it after the war, maybe like in the 1940s. I don't know exactly, but that's where I grew up. We lived in a two-bedroom house first, and then my dad in 1959-60, sold the house and my family built a two-story structure there. We had the bottom floor, three bedrooms and a patio, and a two-car garage, where we lived. The upstairs was a two-bedroom rental, and next to it was a one-bedroom rental.

GK: Did you have brothers, sisters?

EC: I was the oldest brother. My brother was five years younger. My sister was seven years younger.

GK: So, how did you get involved with the group Kokua Kalama, later known as Kokua Hawaii?

EC: Well, I had just come back from Vietnam. I was drafted after high school, I graduated in '65. I attended the University of Hawaii Manoa for a while.

There were about 20 of us guys who came out of high school and went to Manoa. We just partied and we joined this fraternity. We were just trying to have a good time. We were hanging out at the Catholic Newman Center. . . with the Catholic clubs. Saint Louis was all boys and very conservative and restrictive. And when I went to UH Manoa, there were girls, and the social thing. . . I wasn't focusing on grades. I just did a lot of partying and drinking and. . . the next thing you know, I wasn't passing classes. The university gave me a suspension, saying you can't come back for six months. Then you can come back on probation. You got to keep up two-point something grade-point average. I failed miserably in all the courses I took.

GK: So what happened?

EC: When I found myself not able to go back from June 1965 through September 1966, I had to get a job. So, I was working. . . I think I was working at Liberty House in Ala Moana Shopping Center. And then by October I got a Selective Service induction notice, telling me to report for the physical. So, I scrambled to try join the Army Reserves. . . Then, finally, I just figured if I just go for two years, you know, what the hell? . . . My father was a veteran too. He worked in Pearl Harbor. He said, "You got to do your duty, son." So, I said to myself, "Okay I'm just going to do my duty. I'm just trying to do the minimum of 24 months. It will qualify me for a GI bill that would give me the opportunity to go back to school, and the government would pay for it. So that was my attitude. I'd just get drafted, and when I come back from 'Nam, I could go back to school. That was an 18-year-old thinking.

GK: Yeah, so what year was that?

EC: I got inducted in February of 1967. I just turned 19. I was on my way to basic

training. At that time, I had a girlfriend, and she was my first love. And I was totally romantic, in a dream bubble—I will do my duty, and I'll come back, not thinking what Vietnam represented. I was so naïve. You know, I was taking ROTC in high school, and I thought it was about marching and being an orderly, which I liked. You know, I never thought about the killing phase. You know, but then I figured out, I think I can do this.

But basic training was very brutal. It was very harsh, and very racist. They didn't call us "n------," but they called us "pineapples." And it almost meant, a nice way to call us, instead of calling us "n------." Because the term "pineapple" was referred to what the Japanese Americans did for the Army in World War II. And all those basic training guys, all those guys in the Army just took it for granted, that "Oh, you guys from Hawaii, you guys are the best fighters we ever had in the Army." So, you're going to do well. And in basic we did. You know, we're gung ho and then I thought for sure I was gonna be an infantryman. I was gonna go train and become a rifleman and go to Vietnam. But instead at the end of my eight to nine weeks of basic training, I get assigned to be a cook and I was really disappointed.

However, when I went to cook school, I kind of enjoyed it. After I got out of that, I was assigned to another unit. I was preparing to go to Vietnam. Long story short, I get a "Dear John" letter. Heartbroken, I wanted to come home and see if I could regain the love of my life. But she was already pregnant by somebody else. And, I had no idea. I had no idea what she was up to. So, with all that shock and disappointment, I said, ". . . I'm just going to volunteer for Vietnam." So, I did. Then I got a 40, I got a six-week leave, forty-five days before I went to 'Nam. So, I came home and tried to talk to her, but she already got married. And she was going to have a baby. I was in shock. Total shock. So, here it was, late October, almost Halloween. I wound up in Vietnam. And yeah, after the service, I came out, I got hurt in Vietnam. I had to go to Japan in October 1968 for surgical repair.

GK: So how did you get hurt in Vietnam? What was it?

EC: I was working as a cook, yeah. At our compound at night, we always got rocketed. There's always like firefights going on. There are things that happened that I still can't talk about. So, I was walking to work, and they had dug a ditch without putting any barriers around it. And I fell in this ditch. At night, the whole compound was blacked out. In other words, it's very dark. And, they didn't let you use lights, because of incoming firefights going on. So, I got hurt and I tore my left knee—medial meniscus. So, I had to wobble around in a cast for a while. And then, during the Tet Offensive Team in '68, we got attacked. We got ripped. I got assigned to be a cook for a one-star general, and then the war went into a totally different direction. For me, I was lucky. . . Because I had this big cast in my leg, while I was recovering, I got assigned to be a general's cook. The general was born and raised in Hawaii, was a haole guy. And his aide was retiring, moving on. The aide was a Japanese guy from Palolo and Kaimuki High School, a couple of years older than me.

The aide who recruited me asked, "You can cook?"

I said, "Yeah."

"Okay, make something for the general."

I think I made him teriyaki steak or something. You know, that's how I got the position. So, I worked for the general, maybe from February 'til October. And in the meantime, my knee came out of the cast. . . I don't know what happened but the partial tear became into almost like a full-blown tear, so I was hobbling most of the time, you know, after that.

So, at the end of my October duty, I was excited to go back home. I was done. I was going to get out of the Army, but I said, I need to go do the surgery. So, the general made arrangements for me to go to Japan. I get to Japan, and it's the first time I see these demonstrators. They're holding a big sign outside of Tachikawa Airbase (near Tokyo). They're holding these big signs saying, "Kick the imperialist, get out of Vietnam." And they're just screaming and rioting right on the edge of the airbase and we're coming in on a big hospital ship you know, C -141.

GK: What was your reaction?

EC: I had no idea what was going on in the outside world, you know. No idea, except I knew that Martin Luther King got assassinated in February. Bobby Kennedy went down. But news back home just didn't mean anything while you were in the war.. . . in a way all you do is count the time before you come home. So that's what I was doing in 1967-68. So, when I got home in 1969, I finally got discharged, I was like. . . I was pretty straight when I went in. I drank a little bit, but I never smoked pot. When I came home and I hung out with my high school friends, college buddies. . . I got turned on. . . When I got back into UH, everybody was protesting. I thought, what the hell is this?

I kind of sat in on some anti-war protest. It started to make sense. When I met this guy, John Witeck. He was part of this group called Youth Action. So, I was doing some kind of paper on "Why are we in Vietnam." I thought, I was over that, and I could talk about my experience, and what happened, what I felt. But I really couldn't talk to anybody about what happened to me in Vietnam, because it was so hard for me to. I could never talk to anybody as to what happened to me, and the atrocity and then the cover ups that I saw and the racism that I experienced. So, I just stuffed it. The more I got stoned, the better I felt. Drunk and stoned, chase women. Hey, you know, cope, cope with the war.

GK: What happened?

EC: I just joined Youth Action, and then I met Kalani, and then I went to a couple of meetings up at the UH. People really helped. I started smoking more pot than before and while I was stoned, I was talking. I went to a couple of American Friends Service Committee meetings with Quakers.

GK: Yeah.

EC: And I met Wally Fukunaga at Off Center Coffee House

GK: What happened?

EC: There were some really interesting dialogues. I never really told people I was a veteran. I was ashamed I was a veteran because people were spitting at veterans. Veterans were not being well received, especially us Vietnam veterans. I just kind of hid it. I started growing my hair longer. And started trying to integrate into what I thought was the hip scene, you know, of the '70s.

GK: All right.

EC: So that's how I got involved. John gave me some books to read. And you know, Kalani and I were talking a lot. I had no idea what these guys are talking about. But they all seemed pretty interesting. I never knew my history at all. That really interested me, and I wanted to know. I came back not knowing who I was. I mean, I thought I was an American. But when I get ordered to Vietnam, I'm the. . . enemy because I looked like a Vietnamese. When I was in the war, you know, I was weighing like 145 pounds, with a size 30 waist. I was really thin, and really young looking. Uh, when I got back, even though I was 21, I'd go into the bars and you know, the discos, they were always looking at me like, "Let me see your ID. You look like you're only in high school." I looked young and skinny. And so, I was always getting carded. And when I went back to UH, I still looked like I was just a freshman.

GK: What made you go into Kalama Valley?

EC: Hanging out with Youth Action got me involved in Kalama Valley.

GK: When was the first time you visited Kalama Valley?

EC: I was involved about a year before the arrests (May 11, 1971).

GK: What led to the arrests?

EC: I started going to all these anti-war rallies, environmental stuff. John Kelly was a big organizer. He was a good speaker. There were some really cool people—surfers. I used to surf. All these surfers were getting politicized and talking. Unlike the surfers that I knew when I was growing up, these guys were educated.

GK: Let's get back to Kalama Valley. What was happening as far as activities?

EC: Kokua Kalama member Linton Park was interviewing people in Kalama Valley, and he was writing articles, passing out flyers, leaflets, doing rallies. We were mainly passing them out at UH because that's where our base was for our outreach into the community. We're just a bunch of students.

GK: Yeah.

EC: And I just followed along. I didn't do any talking in the beginning.

GK: So how did you feel?

EC: I felt a bit weird. The Asians in school were always at the top of the class. They assimilated really well into the American system. I kind of associated myself with that mentality. That class in the structure. I was Asian, I was gonna succeed. So, when I saw the Hawaiian side of my ethnicity in Hawaii and the way they were being treated, I thought, "Man, this is terrible. This is really like putting down my own blood." So, I felt an empathy, and when Kalani and I talked—he was from Kaimuki, and he knew my brother, we had a common bond.

He was just always joking, and so was I. So, we got along great that way. But then he was radicalizing me at the same time he was getting radicalized. I think he got sent to New York to some kind of big convention there. He was speaking with Moani Akaka. They went away to represent the Hawaiian movement and the fight in Kalama Valley and came back with those big words like "self-determination" and "sovereignty." I spoke them but I had no idea what that meant. You know what I mean?

GK: Yes.

EC: There was talk about having a revolution, picking up the gun, we're gonna fight America. That's basically how we were thinking. But really, I'm only 20 years old.

GK: How real was that? You've been to Vietnam.

EC: How real was that for me?

GK: Yeah. The gun?

EC: I said, this is. . . ridiculous, man. I mean, what are you going to do, shoot the. . . feds with a couple rifles. You got to be kidding me. But I guess we're idealistic, and we're talking and protesting and caught up in the moment.

GK: I understand most of the people were talking that way hadn't really shot a gun in their life.

EC: Right. And I had, but I didn't have to shoot people. I said to myself, this sounds like everybody is cheering, "Ra-ra-ra." But when you get into the real battle and bullets start flying, you're not gonna be saying, "Ra-ra-ra." You're gonna be running, and you realize, you're fighting these guys with a slingshot.

GK: On the day of the arrest, a couple of Hawaiian leaders came to support us, including Kahuna Sammy Lono?

EC: I really respected uncle Lono. Before the arrest, he said a pule for us when the helicopter was flying high behind us. I saw all the Hawaiian cops back away.

GK: You've indicated your experience in Vietnam was not a good one, obviously. Could you give me an example of how bad it got and how that influenced your decision to get involved in Kokua Hawaii?

EC: I worked with a bunch of civilians who were all Vietnamese workers. And all the white guys in my unit are looking at me and calling me a "gook lover." They called me "gook" at night, because during the daytime it's business as usual.

At night, that's when the war was being fought. That's when we were getting rocketed. That's when you know, you were on alert, even though we're in base camp. We're in a big Army headquarters. We were surrounded by a huge perimeter, and the fighting was going on outside of the base. They couldn't attack our base because we're so fortified, I guess.

But you could always hear it. Once in a while, a rocket would come in, and we'd have to take cover. . . You could hear pop-pop-pop all night and see flares, and then felt the ground rumbling. You knew they were shooting out there, but you just didn't know where. People used to say, when you hear a whistle coming in, you better take cover. "Incoming!" They would shout, "Incoming!" And you got to hit the ground because you never know where that rocket was gonna land. . . You could die. . . if you weren't paying attention.

GK: Right, so let me ask you. In terms of the people. I mean, you were thinking you were an American. You were going to do your two years of duty. You get there, and they were calling you a "gook?" So how did that make you feel? I mean, suddenly they were disassociating you from what you thought you were.

EC: I only knew a couple of African American soldiers. We were in base camp. We weren't soldiers, we weren't carrying guns, we weren't going out there. However, I met some guys who were real soldiers who would come in out there and get drunk. They'd tell us these stories to base camp guys. In the military at that time, the racism was so blatant. They were pulling all these African Americans into the military, with the choice of going to jail or into the military. Guys were killing (fragging, tossing a hand grenade at) their superiors.

During the Tet Offensive, just the concussion from a bomb blew off the roof of our living quarters. It was just like a hurricane. The adrenaline kept us going for days. The Army issued me a rifle. There was a hospital near a heliport where I and others brought in the wounded for days.

GK: What motivated you to join a group like Kokua Hawaii or Kokua Kalama?

EC: I was really angry at the way the people in power, the country club people, and their attitude toward the regular people. My dad was a working-class guy, a blue collar worker at Pearl Harbor. He was treated like that his whole life. Through on the job training he did the job of a mechanical engineer, but he couldn't pass a written test. . . Finally, when I got back from Vietnam, the Naval Shipyard promoted him on merit. They jumped him from a GS7 to a GS12. And he started going around the world teaching guys how to repair stuff on the submarines.

GK: Yeah.

EC: He wanted me to go to school and get an office job, could be something professional like my uncle, maybe an attorney. So that's what he was hoping I would do. But when I came back from the war, I couldn't do it.

GK: You did help with the organizing of Kokua Hawaii's first concert, the one at Andrew's Amphitheater at the University of Hawaii. How was that?

EC: I felt comfortable doing fundraising, helping to put together the concert. It was a learning curve, but we did it with a committee with Soli and Gwen at committee meetings. Edwina Akaka's cousin Doug Mossman who was a KCCN deejay and had acted in the TV series *Hawaiian Eye*. He helped to organize the talent.

GK: Looking back at the Kalama Valley anti-eviction struggle, what are your thoughts?

EC: With the perspective I have now, the struggle was not so much about race. It was about class consciousness and against the ruling class.